

In Memoriam: Stuart Levine

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Stuart G. Levine was many things: educator, scholar, writer, editor, musician. I encountered him late in his life and career, and he introduced himself as the founder of the American Studies Department at the University of Kansas, where, at the time, I was a graduate student. As luck would have it, I had recently been tasked with researching the history of the American Studies Department by its then-chair Cheryl B. Lester. Levine and I visited in person twice about his role in developing American studies as a field of study at KU and in the region and his editorship of *American Studies*. In addition to my conversations with Levine and others intimately familiar with American studies on campus and in the region, I was granted access to department records that revealed the joys, struggles, and strife on the part of Levine and American studies faculty in building a strong and vital program for students across the state, the region, the nation, and the globe. At the conclusion of the project, I left with the impression that Levine was excited by, recognized the value of, and promoted the interplay of diverse ideas.

Levine came to the University of Kansas in 1958 as a professor of English, where he worked with Edward Grier to administer the new American Studies Program. In 1964, following Grier's decision to return full-time to the English Department, Levine began the work of creating a graduate program in American studies. In shaping an American studies graduate program, Levine hoped students would pursue their individual interests and put their own knowledge and expertise into dialogue with others for the purpose of developing a more nuanced

understanding of culture. And Levine was democratic about the endeavor. In his initial proposal for an American studies graduate program at the University of Kansas, Levine wrote, “One of the extraordinary and refreshing facts about a program of this sort is that year after year, in class after class, the students, because they have had training in related areas different from those in which their professors have been trained, know more about some of the very problems which he brings up than he does himself.”¹

Levine can be largely credited with establishing some of the defining characteristics of the graduate program in American studies at the University of Kansas: its curricular adaptability, flexibility on the part of students to chart their own course paired with a commitment to professional competence. Of course, academic programs do not spring into existence fully formed, nor are they the product of any single individual. American studies at KU was no different. It developed over its first decade into a full-fledged department that offered faculty and students an educational and intellectual experience unavailable when American studies operated out of the briefcases of either Grier or Levine in the English Department. During the first five years of the graduate program—between 1965 and 1969, when the first PhDs were granted—the faculty and students began working through the process of translating the ideas offered in Levine’s proposal into clear and coherent policies, procedures, and curriculum.

American Studies provided another outlet for Levine to bring diverse and sometimes challenging ideas into the conversations that defined the changing nature of American studies as a field of inquiry. In 1960, Grier, then president of the regional Central Mississippi Valley American Studies Association, arranged through a grant from the KU Endowment Association to begin publishing the organization’s journal at the University of Kansas; this provided exposure for American studies at the University of Kansas to others in the region and brought emerging trends in American studies into the view of Americanists at KU. Levine was named editor of the journal, a position he held for thirty years. In a 1988 profile of Levine and *American Studies*, Roger Martin commented on Levine’s use of the journal to get scholars to “examine things differently.” At the time, Levine summarized his role, saying “My main function in the field of American studies is to try to identify areas and potential connections and then get a dialogue going.”² That ideal—one that Levine pushed towards in his work both as administrator of the American Studies Department and in his editorship of *American Studies*—is something Levine leaves for those of us engaged in intellectual work to continue pursuing.

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Notes

1. “Initial Proposal for the Doctorate in American Civilization” [American Studies Subject and Correspondence Files, #17/17/1 – Folder: “Evaluation,” Kenneth Spencer Research Library].
2. Roger Martin, “*American Studies* Editor Emphasizes Dialogue,” 1988.